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CHINA

Pope: a wish unlikely to be fulfilled

It is most unlikely that Pope Francis's wish to visit China will be fulfilled in the foreseeable future. In an interview with the Hong Kong-based newspaper Asia Times, the pope spoke enthusiastically about China describing it as "a great country" and "a great culture, with an inexhaustible wisdom" but Beijing's response didn't go beyond the usual political rhetoric.

The day after the interview was published, the Chinese Foreign Department released a short statement pointing out that "China has always been sincere about improving Sino-Vatican ties, and have made many efforts in this regard". It then dropped a hint of criticism by raising the hope "that the Vatican can take a flexible, pragmatic attitude to creating conditions for improving ties".

This response is at odds with the expressions of praise pronounced by the pontiff who didn't utter a single word of disapproval over China's poor human rights record or the difficulties faced by the Chinese Catholics who recognize the pope as their spiritual leader. Chinese Catholics are only permitted to attend churches controlled by the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association which answers directly to the Communist Party. Those loyal to Rome are forced to practice their faith underground.

According to a recent Amnesty International report, Chinese authorities have demolished churches and removed crosses and other religious symbols, while those practicing banned religions face harassment, imprisonment and torture

.Yet the pope's interview included no appeal for Christians in China, or Catholics specifically, despite similar statements frequently made about religious minorities suffering in other parts of the world.

China's constitution guarantees religious freedom, but in practice religious activities are tightly controlled or altogether prohibited as in the case of serving Communist Party members who are officially banned from practicing any religion, a rule that has been recently extended also to retired party officials. The prohibition was sanctioned a few days after the pope's interview.

A party representative quoted by Chinese media said that "there are clear rules [prescribing] that retired cadres and party members cannot believe in religion, cannot take part in religious activities, and must resolutely fight against cults."

All churches have to be approved by the state and authorities keep a close eye on their activities to contain their influence. A lot of water must flow under the bridges of the Yellow River before the pope will be allowed to visit China.